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Senate Remarks: Making the Military a Stage Prop for Politics

In my 50 years as a member of Congress, I have had the privilege to witness the defining rhetorical moments of a number of American presidents. I have listened spellbound to the soaring oratory of John Kennedy and Ronald Reagan. I have listened grimly to the painful soul-searching of Lyndon Johnson and Richard Nixon.

Presidential speeches are an important marker of any President's legacy. These are the tangible moments that history seizes upon and records for posterity. For this reason, I was deeply troubled by both the content and the context of President Bush's remarks to the American people last week marking the end of the combat phase of the war in Iraq. As I watched the President's fighter jet swoop down onto the deck of the aircraft carrier Abraham Lincoln, I could not help but contrast the reported simple dignity of President Lincoln at Gettysburg with the flamboyant showmanship of President Bush aboard the USS Abraham Lincoln.

President Bush's address to the American people announcing combat victory in Iraq deserved to be marked with solemnity, not extravagance; with gratitude to God, not self-congratulatory gestures. American blood has been shed on foreign soil in defense of the President's policies. This is not some made-for-TV backdrop for a campaign commercial. This is real life, and real lives have been lost. To me, it is an affront to the Americans killed or injured in Iraq for the President to exploit the trappings of war for the momentary spectacle of a speech. I do not begrudge his salute to America's warriors aboard the carrier Lincoln, for they have performed bravely and skillfully, as have their countrymen still in Iraq, but I do question the motives of a deskbound President who assumes the garb of a warrior for the purposes of a speech.

As I watched the President's speech, before the great banner proclaiming "Mission Accomplished," I could not help but be reminded of the tobacco barns of my youth, which served as country road advertising backdrops for the slogans of chewing tobacco purveyors. I am loath to think of an aircraft carrier being used as an advertising backdrop for a presidential political slogan, and yet that is what I saw.

What I heard the President say also disturbed me. It may make for grand theater to describe Saddam Hussein as an ally of al Qaeda or to characterize the fall of Baghdad as a victory in the war on terror, but stirring rhetoric does not necessarily reflect sobering reality. Not one of the 19 September 11th hijackers was an Iraqi. In fact, there is not a shred of evidence to link the September 11 attack on the United States to Iraq. There is no doubt in my mind that Saddam Hussein was an evil despot who brought great suffering to the Iraqi people, and there is no doubt in my mind that he encouraged and rewarded acts of terrorism against Israel. But his crimes are not those of Osama bin Laden, and bringing Saddam Hussein to justice will not bring justice to the victims of 9-11. The United States has made great progress in its efforts to disrupt and destroy the al Qaeda terror network. We can take solace and satisfaction in that fact. We should not risk tarnishing those very real accomplishments by trumpeting victory in Iraq as a victory over Osama bin Laden.

We are reminded in the gospel of Saint Luke, "For unto whomsoever much is given,

president. We expect, nay demand, that our leaders be scrupulous in the truth and faithful to the facts. We do not seek theatrics or hyperbole. We do not require the stage management of our victories. The men and women of the United States military are to be saluted for their valor and sacrifice in Iraq. Their heroics and quiet resolve speak for themselves. The prowess and professionalism of America's military forces do not need to be embellished by the gaudy excesses of a political campaign.

War is not theater, and victory is not a campaign slogan. I join with the President and all Americans in expressing heartfelt thanks and gratitude to our men and women in uniform for their service to our country, and for the sacrifices that they have made on our behalf. But on this point I differ with the President: I believe that our military forces deserve to be treated with respect and dignity, and not used as stage props to embellish a presidential speech.

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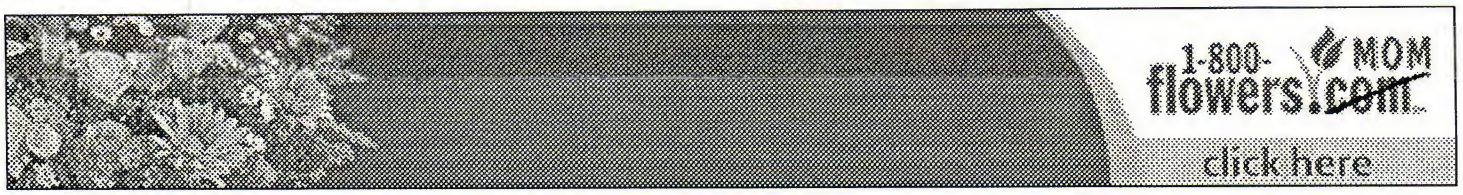

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Bush wanted dramatic carrier landing: aide

Tue May 6, 4:50 PM ET

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WASHINGTON (AFP) - President George W. Bush (news - web sites)'s dramatic jet landing aboard a US aircraft carrier last week was unnecessary, but he wanted to experience the risky maneuver, his spokesman said.

AFP Photo

White House spokesman Ari Fleischer (news - web sites) had originally told reporters that Bush had to use a Navy combat plane to reach the USS Abraham Lincoln because the ship would be "hundreds of miles from shore," out of helicopter range.

It was, in fact, some 30 miles (48 kilometers) off the coast of California -- but the landing made for endlessly replayed television images and enabled Bush to swagger among crew members while wearing a flight suit, even though he was not at the plane's controls when it landed.

"The president wanted to land on it, on an aircraft that would allow him to see an aircraft landing the same way that the pilots saw an aircraft landing. He wanted to see it as realistically as possible," Fleischer said Tuesday.

"And that's why, once the initial decision was made to fly out on the Viking, even when a helicopter option became doable," said the spokesman.

Asked why the carrier had arrived to within sight of land ahead of schedule, Fleischer suggested that the weather may have been one factor.

Bush's speech marked the unofficial launch of his 2004 reelection bid, prompting some opposition Democrats to grouse that the made-for-television address amounted to manipulating the military for political purposes.

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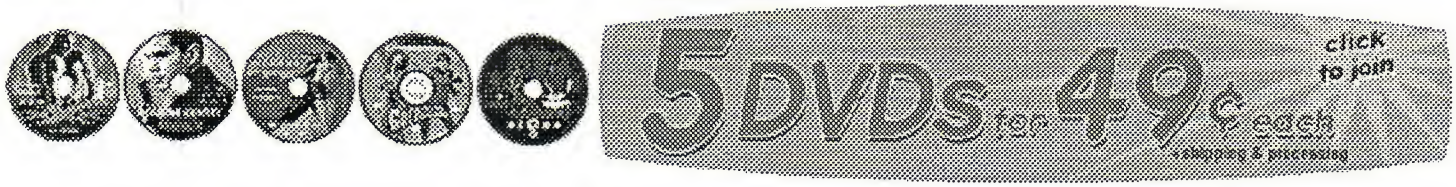

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Rumsfeld Backs N.M. Oilman for Navy Chief

Tue May 6, 4:15 PM ET

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By ROBERT BURNS, AP Military Writer

WASHINGTON - Defense Secretary Donald H. Rumsfeld has recommended to President Bush (news - web sites) that he nominate New Mexico oil man Colin R. McMillan to be the next secretary of the Navy, two senior defense officials said Tuesday.

McMillan, 67, of Roswell, N.M., runs Permian Exploration Corp., and was chairman of Bush's New Mexico presidential campaign in 2000. He served in the Marine Corps from 1957-72 and was an assistant secretary of defense in the early 1990s when Vice President Dick Cheney (news - web sites) was the defense secretary.

The Navy has not had a permanent secretary since Gordon England left in January to become deputy secretary of the new Department of Homeland Security. Hansford T. Johnson has served as acting secretary since Feb. 7. The Navy secretary is the service's most senior civilian official.

Civilian leadership positions in the Army and Air Force also are in transition.

Army Secretary Thomas White was dismissed by Rumsfeld on April 25 and is due to leave office Friday with no replacement nominated yet. Defense officials have said Rumsfeld wants the Air Force secretary, James Roche, to replace White, but no official announcements have been made.

Defense officials speaking on condition of anonymity said Rumsfeld forwarded the McMillan recommendation to Bush, but it was unclear whether all details were settled, including terms under which McMillan would dispose of any stock holdings that could conflict with his official duties.

A McMillan nomination would be subject to Senate confirmation.

The Albuquerque Journal in Tuesday's editions quoted Steve Bell, the chief of staff for Sen. Pete Domenici (news, bio, voting record), R-N.M., as saying it was "very likely" that McMillan would be Bush's nominee.

McMillan was born in Texas. After graduating from the University of North Carolina in 1957 he joined the Marines. He served on active duty until 1962 when he switched to the Marine Corps Reserve.

In Bush's father's administration, McMillan served as assistant secretary of defense for production and logistics.

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